

*Striving to be Extremely Peculiar*  
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Luke 14:1,7-14  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 28, 2022

A few days ago, the members of the Open Doors Steering Committee came to my house for dinner. This was mostly to just have a little party. These eight people have worked diligently to lead St. Paul's through the process of planning for construction and writing grant applications and raising funds for a \$2 million renovation project at St. Paul's. We ate dinner and talked with each other in my backyard.

When we finished dessert, it was getting dark and the mosquitos were starting to bite, so we carried the dishes inside. Then we sat down at my dining room table for a short meeting. There were nine of us and someone made sure there were nine chairs around the table. There were three chairs on one side of the table, three chairs on the other side of the table, two chairs at one end of the table, and a single chair at the head of the table.

One after another people came into the dining room to sit down. I sat down with two other people along one side of the table. Eventually, there was just one seat left. Can you guess which seat was left? It was the seat at the head of the table.

The seat at the head of the table was empty. The chair of the committee did not want to sit there. The co-chair of the capital campaign did not want to sit there. The rector did not want to sit at the head of the table. The person who has been leading the entire effort for seven years did not want to sit at the head of the table. No one wanted to sit at the head of the table.

This is a peculiar thing about the people of St. Paul's. The seat at the head of the table is the seat of honor and power, and no one wanted to take it.

It doesn't work this way in other places. It doesn't work this way in corporate America. It hasn't worked this way in some of the churches and diocese I have been part of. In those other places, there would be no hesitation about who would sit at the head of the table, and give a ten-minute speech and show by their actions that they see themselves as the guest of honor.

This is a peculiar thing about the members of St. Paul's. They work very hard. They solve big problems. They do lots of good work in the world. Yet they do not like to be the center of attention.

It has something to do with Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus says, "when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." It seems the people of St. Paul's have heard this message and internalized it.

People at St. Paul's don't like to receive any sort of honors. This is sort of difficult for me, because my leadership style, whether I am teaching a class of eight-year-olds or working in the church is to point out the good work people are doing and to say thank you. But the people of St. Paul's are sort of suspicious of this. I can tell.

The people of St. Paul's don't like to receive special honors from the rector. They don't like to hear someone delivering a speech telling all of the things they have accomplished. It just sort of rubs them the wrong way. Sometimes it seems that the only person who is really comfortable giving speeches around here is the person who is holding the microphone right now!

Reading Luke 14 again I have to admit, I am probably wrong and the people of St. Paul's are probably right, in terms of doing the Jesus' thing in the Jesus' sort of way. The people of St. Paul's have this peculiar characteristic where they do not like to receive special honors.

Yet Jesus calls us to a life of peculiarity that goes well beyond a refusal to take the place of honor at the dinner table. A few weeks ago, two of our members held a little ice cream party. The peculiar part was that these two women did not invite their best friends to the ice cream party. They invited the senior residents of the YMCA apartments to join them for an ice cream party. It was a very

warm evening. They went to the ice cream shop, and it was closed. So the two women led the group down the street and purchased frozen drinks for everyone at Starbucks.

It's almost like these two women had read these exact verses from Luke 14 and decided to take them to heart. *When you give a luncheon, do not invite your friends..or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, and the blind.*

I just have to point out the obvious here and say, this is **not normal**. Very few people in the world do this....ever. Almost everyone in the world invites their friends and relatives to dinner. The next week or the next month their friends and relatives invite them over, sort of in exchange.

Jesus gives us extremely peculiar directions, the direction to invite the poor, the crippled, and the blind to eat dinner with you at your house. This idea is extremely peculiar and extremely challenging for us. It is more challenging than not sitting in the place of honor. When we refrain from taking or receiving honors, we are giving up an illusion of something that is not true, the illusion that we are better than other people.

When we invite the poor, the crippled, and the blind into our homes we are giving up something that is true and that is truly valuable to us. We are giving up our lives in some way. Speaking for myself, I like eating dinner with my family and friends. I usually do not like to eat dinner with strangers. It is hard work. I admit it would be harder for me to invite a stranger who is poor or who is crippled to eat dinner at my house. I would have to give up something very valuable to me.

Jesus challenges us to do something extremely peculiar. Jesus challenges us to give up any pretense we are better than others, to give up our privacy, to give up our comfort. This will never be easy for us. Perhaps I should say, this will never be easy for me.

I think some people are very good at inviting the poor, the crippled, and the blind to eat lunch with them. They don't carry around this assumption that their time belongs to them alone. They don't carry around this assumption that they have the privilege of eating meals with their closest friends and family members, and not with strangers.

You can find these people eating at the Samaritan Center each day. They do not assume that they have the right to eat only with their friends. Most of the people at the Samaritan Center do not expect to be seated at the head of the table. Most of them are poor, and some are disabled.

They do not have expectations of privilege or honor. This is a different mindset. This is a way of thinking Jesus is calling us to. It is a way of thinking that does not put our lives, our honor, our expectations in the center of the universe.

For me, this is very difficult. But then I see this example of the two women leading the group of seniors to get ice cream on a hot evening. Inspired by their example, I will strive to follow this extremely peculiar way of Jesus.

This is the journey God is calling us to take; it is a journey of leaving behind our expectations, pride, and greed. It is a journey where we make an empty space in our lives, then pray it will be filled by God's love and grace.